PATTERNS OF POWER · THEORY · BELIEF

The Belief That Cannot Be Manufactured

Against the Superstructure Account of Religion and Rule — Why the Ruled Are Not Deceived, How an Occupant's Fidelity Is a Variable Separate From the Ground He Claims, Why Surveillance Is the Tell of a Belief That Did Not Take, and What Iran Since 1979 Shows That Rome Cannot

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with Claude (Anthropic) · 2026

held as tested, not revealed

Preface: what this paper is

The collaboration, the argument, and the promise that it stands alone.

This paper belongs to the Patterns of Power project and is a collaboration. The questions, the direction, the pattern-recognition and the final judgement are the author's; the synthesis, the drafting and the scholarly retrieval were done with Claude, Anthropic's model, with every load-bearing claim checked against a source before anything was built on it. The method is declared because it is a new way of making knowledge and ought to be visible rather than concealed.

The project asks how a distribution of holdings taken by force becomes an arrangement that armed men will defend rather than contest. Across three dozen cases it has found that such arrangements rest on a shared source of rightfulness — an **anchor** — that none of the men competing could have made. Most of that work concerns the men with weapons. This paper is about everybody else.

It is about **belief**: what it does, why it is load-bearing, where it comes from, and — the part that has been missing — how to tell from the outside whether an order has it.

It argues against the most influential account of that subject, which holds that ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class, that religion is a reflection of material conditions serving the interests of those who benefit from them, and that the ruled comply because they have been given a false picture of their own situation. That account is taken seriously here, stated at its strongest, and credited with the very large amount of it that is correct. But it has the causal arrow backwards on the one question that matters most, and the record shows why: **the people who most needed to manufacture belief, and had every resource for doing so, could not.**

The paper then contributes two instruments the project has lacked.

The first is a **split in the mass variable**. This project has been asking one question — do the ruled believe the ground? — where there are two. The strength of the ground and the perceived fidelity of the men occupying it are separate quantities, they move independently, and compliance tracks their product rather than either alone. Which means an order can face a legitimacy collapse without any decline in the underlying belief at all, and the record of the last twenty years contains a large example.

The second is a **measurement instrument, and it runs in the opposite direction from the one the project already uses.** On the elite side, expenditure on an anchor is evidence the anchor works: force never pays for what it does not need. On the mass side

the sign inverts. **Surveillance is the tell of a belief that did not take** — because it is what a ruler buys instead of the thing he could not obtain, and its scale is a direct read on how much of that thing is missing.

The case worked throughout is **Iran since 1979**, chosen deliberately over the ancient and medieval material this project usually handles. A framework about belief that can only be demonstrated on Romans and Ethiopians invites the suspicion that it is describing credulous ancestors. The Iranian case is contemporary, extensively documented, and still running — and it separates the two variables cleanly, because a population whose religious commitment has not collapsed is visibly withdrawing its compliance from the men who claim to represent it.

The paper stands alone. No prior reading is assumed — not of this project, not of Marx or any other theorist, not of Iranian history. Every borrowed idea is built from scratch in plain words, and every author cited is explained before being used.

One discipline governs throughout. Its material includes a state that shot several hundred of its own citizens in a week and switched off their country's connection to the world while doing it. To explain a mechanism is never to defend what it did. This project states that in the phrase *legibility is not pardon*, and discharges it in Part XIII.

The question

A ruler with every resource, and a believer who is not mistaken.

Two puzzles, and the whole paper lives between them.

The first. In 1579 the Mughal emperor Akbar sought to establish that his judgement would settle disputed questions of Islamic law. He had every advantage a manufacturer of legitimacy could want: no rival authority in his territory, a large army, a functioning bureaucracy, a court theologian supplying a doctrine of divine light, and a poet to versify it.

The document that resulted is not a decree. A decree would have been a *farmān*, an order in the emperor's name. What survives is a *maḥẓar* — an **attestation**, in which other men declare that his judgement binds them.

Given the choice between issuing a command and getting somebody else to sign a statement, the most powerful man in South Asia chose the second. **The failure shows up in the grammar of the document**, and it is not an isolated failure: Diocletian sacralised his own person and founded nothing that outlived his abdication; Henry VIII made himself Supreme Head of the Church in England and his own daughter quietly demoted the title.

If ruling ideas are simply the ideas of the ruling class — if belief is what power produces when it needs it — these men should not have failed. They had the power. **Why could they not produce the belief?**

The second puzzle is about the other end. Consider an Iranian who holds that the twelfth Imam went into occultation in the ninth century, that he remains alive and hidden, and that he will return. Consider that this person also, for years, complied with an order claiming to act in that Imam's name — paid, deferred, showed up.

Is that person **deceived**?

The dominant account says something close to yes: that his religion is a picture of the world produced by conditions he does not control and serving interests that are not his, and that his compliance rests on not seeing his situation clearly.

This paper says no, and says that the *no* is not a concession to piety but a structural claim with consequences. **The belief is not an error, it was not manufactured by anybody who benefits from it, and it is load-bearing precisely because all of that is true.** And what has changed in Iran over the last decade is not that people stopped believing. It is that they stopped believing *the men in the chair represent what they*

believe — which is a different variable, with different behaviour, and it is the one this paper exists to isolate.

The framework, compressed

What belief is for, in this account.

Everything below rests on a distinction ordinary speech collapses.

Possession is what force holds now; it is present-tense and expires when the capacity sustaining it expires. **Ownership** is a claim about the future and about other people — that this will be mine tomorrow, and that when I die you will treat my son as its holder. Ownership is not a relation between a person and a thing; it is a structure of expectations about how other people will behave across time. Force is sovereign over the first and impotent over the second, so **the part of a holding force cannot reach must be manufactured out of something that is not force.**

Among armed men, the problem is a coordination failure. A man considering a seizure is forecasting what the *bystanders* will do, and absent a common ground of title each bystander finds that intervention buys casualties and an enemy, and that intervening alone makes him the next target — so all wait, each knowing the others reason identically. Give every holding a common source and the arithmetic inverts: an attack on any title becomes an attack on the ground beneath all of them, and a coalition forms that nobody has to lead. Call that source the **anchor**. **It works on expectations rather than on wills** — a man abstains not because he believes but because he can count.

And here is where the two audiences separate.

For the **armed and administrative few**, the anchor does not require belief at all. A baron who privately regards the coronation as theatre still cannot profit from attacking his neighbour, provided he expects the other barons to treat that attack as an assault on their own titles. His scepticism is irrelevant because his behaviour tracks his forecast of them. They may all be equally sceptical and nothing changes, so long as none can be sure the others share it.

For the **mass**, the mechanism is different and this is the paper's subject. A peasant, a shopkeeper, a conscript is not part of a bystander coalition that punishes seizures. What he does is comply or not comply — pay, defer, show up, obey, report, or fail to. And the difference between an order in which he complies because the arrangement is simply how the world is, and one in which he complies because somebody is watching, **is the difference between an order that is cheap to run and one that is expensive.**

That is the whole of why belief is load-bearing on the mass side. Not because rulers need to be loved. Because **a believed subject polices himself for free**, and an unbelieving one has to be policed, and policing at population scale is the single largest recurring cost any order can incur.

Two further pieces of the apparatus are needed and both come from outside this project.

The economist **Barry Weingast** argued in 1997 that a sovereign who wishes to transgress needs only one group's acquiescence, so that subjects divided about what counts as a violation are picked off one at a time while subjects sharing a standard are not — and that a shared standard works less by restraining the ruler directly than by **giving everyone the same signal about when to act.**

The political scientist **Michael Suk-Young Chwe** argued in 2001 that coordination requires more than everyone knowing a thing; it requires everyone to know that everyone knows it, upward without limit — a condition called **common knowledge**. His observation is that public ceremony is a machine for producing it, because a ritual works not by transmitting a message to each person but by letting each person **see everyone else receiving it**.

Hold both. They will turn out to explain why a modern state will disconnect its own country from the internet.

Part I — The rival account, stated at its strongest

What the superstructure argument actually says.

The account this paper argues against is usually summarised badly, so it is worth setting out properly and in its own terms before it is disagreed with.

Karl Marx, writing in 1859, held that the way a society produces its material life conditions its social, political and intellectual life generally — that it is not consciousness which determines existence but social existence which determines consciousness. On this model the economic structure is the **base**, and law, politics, religion, philosophy and art form a **superstructure** that arises on it and corresponds to it.

In a manuscript written with **Friedrich Engels** in the mid-1840s the political consequence is stated directly: the ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas — the class which has the material force of society at its disposal has its intellectual force at the same time, so that the thoughts of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it.

On religion specifically, Marx's best-known passage is from 1843 and is far more sympathetic than the caricature. Religion there is described as the expression of real distress and the protest against it — the sigh of an oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world — before it is called the opium of the people. The metaphor in 1843 is not primarily *drug used by the powerful to sedate the weak*; opium was medicine, and the point is that religion is real relief for a real wound, whose criticism is therefore the criticism of the conditions that require it.

The term **false consciousness** is not Marx's. It comes from Engels, in a letter of 1893, describing a thinker who works with motives he believes to be real and which are not the true motives driving him, so that the process is completed in appearance under a false consciousness.

Two later developments matter because they are stronger than the original.

Antonio Gramsci, writing in prison in the late 1920s and 1930s, introduced **hegemony**: the observation that a dominant class rules not primarily by coercion but by securing consent, and that this consent is produced through the institutions of civil society — schools, churches, newspapers, associations — so that its worldview comes

to be experienced as ordinary common sense rather than as one view among others. This is a serious advance because it makes ideology a site of active struggle rather than an automatic reflection.

Louis Althusser, writing in 1970, formalised the machinery: alongside the repressive apparatus of army, police and courts, a state possesses **ideological state apparatuses** — church, school, family, media — which reproduce not merely labour power but the relations of production themselves, by forming subjects who experience their subjection as their own free identity.

Stated at its strongest, then, the rival account is: belief that supports a hierarchy is produced by and for that hierarchy; it is transmitted through institutions the dominant class controls; and it functions by giving the ruled a picture of the world in which their subordination appears natural. It is a genuinely powerful theory, it accounts for an enormous amount of observed behaviour, and it is right about several things this paper depends on.

Part II — What the rival account gets right

A great deal, and it should be conceded before it is contested.

This project's own findings agree with the superstructure account on four substantial points, and pretending otherwise would be dishonest.

One: capture is real and it is the normal condition. This project holds that a class carrying a body of belief is, over a long enough period, always captured — not by conspiracy but by gradient, because a position of that kind is worth more to control than to leave alone. Rulers fund the interpreters, house them, license them, appoint their head, set their examination. The description of ideology serving ruling interests is not a caricature; it is what the record shows almost everywhere, almost all the time.

Two: the apparatus of transmission is real, and Althusser named it correctly. This project calls the position a **seam**: specialisation divides not only labour but knowing, so that in any complex society each person must delegate most of what he holds to sources he cannot check, and a chokepoint appears between the many and the knowledge they cannot reach. Whoever occupies it controls two valves — the inflow that fills a head with the authorised account, and the outflow that starves it of the rival. That is Althusser's machinery, arrived at independently, and the agreement is close.

Three: material conditions constrain what is available. Which cosmologies exist, which can spread, which can be transmitted at all, depend on surplus, literacy, trade routes and the technology of communication. The Shi'i seminaries ran on religious dues which required an economy that produced a surplus. No account of belief that ignores the material base is complete.

Four: Gramsci is right that consent is cheaper than coercion and that the difference is the thing worth studying. This project's entire measure of a successful settlement is cheapness, and that is Gramsci's insight in different vocabulary.

So the disagreement is narrow and it is about **origins**.

> *The superstructure account is a good theory of what happens to a body of belief **after it exists**, and a bad theory of **where it comes from.***

Everything in the rest of this paper follows from that one sentence.

Part III — The manufacturers' graveyard

Why the men with the most power to produce belief were the ones who could not.

If ruling ideas were simply the ideas of the ruling class — if a class with material force has intellectual force at its disposal — then a ruler with sufficient means should be able to produce the belief his position requires. The record says he cannot, and the failures are the most concentrated evidence available.

The property that cannot be conferred

Start with what a source of title actually has to be, from the armed side.

A party competing for the spoils cannot be the author of who gets them. A title granted by a competitor is not a title; it is a forecast about that competitor's health, and everyone holding one knows it. So the source has to be beyond revision by the men competing — **unforgeable by the current claimants.**

Now notice what kind of requirement that is. It is not a feature of an object that a sufficiently well-resourced builder could meet. **It is a fact about the object's history.**

A ruler with unlimited means can build the temple, endow the priesthood, commission the scripture, train the interpreters and stage the ceremony. What he cannot do is make it true that he did not do those things. And every witness to the building retains, permanently, the observation that destroys the instrument: *I watched him make it.* **The property he needs is the absence of the very act he is performing**, which is why the harder he works the worse his position becomes.

The record of the attempts

Diocletian reorganised the Roman state more thoroughly than anyone since Augustus and sacralised his own person as part of the programme. Contemporaries recognised the sacralisation as a novelty. It outlived his abdication by nothing.

Henry VIII made himself Supreme Head of the Church in England in 1534 — a claim attacked by its opponents as an innovation, and one over which Thomas More and John Fisher were executed in 1535. His own daughter quietly demoted it to Supreme Governor within a generation.

Akbar produced an attestation rather than a decree, as above, and the arrangement did not outlive him.

Ahmad Shah Durrani built an Afghan empire on a tribal assembly that any chief could convene — which is exactly why it bound nobody after him.

Against these, set what the durable orders ran on. Ethiopian emperors claimed descent from a lineage established a thousand years before their dynasty existed. Turkish sultans who had taken Persia and Iraq by force sought investiture from a caliphal office three centuries older than their arrival and militarily helpless. Slave soldiers who seized Egypt in 1250 sent men into the desert to find a survivor of the Baghdad caliphs hiding among Bedouin, installed him in Cairo, and maintained that office for two hundred and fifty-six years.

Every durable order in this project's archive ran on a source that predated it, and every attempt by a ruler to manufacture one for himself failed.

Where usable material comes from instead

If the property cannot be conferred, the material must come from outside the contest, and the general route is temporal: from before the players existed.

Biology has a term. In 1982 the palaeontologists **Stephen Jay Gould** and **Elisabeth Vrba** proposed **exaptation** for a feature that arises under one set of pressures and is later co-opted for a use it did not evolve to serve. Feathers long predate flying birds and appear to have served insulation and display. **Flight did not cause feathers. Flight found them.**

The parallel is the paper's central image. Asking who made the first source of political legitimacy is malformed in the way that asking what the first flight feather evolved *for* is malformed. Nobody made it. Cosmologies existed, doing other things — explaining the world, fixing the calendar, ordering marriage, burying the dead, settling quarrels between neighbours — and the coordination problem found them.

From which the finding that inverts the rival account:

> ***Sincerity is the manufacturing process.*** *A body of belief becomes authorless because it accretes across generations out of genuine attempts to understand and order the world, revised by nobody in particular, attributed to no one. That process is the only known way to produce a thing with no author, and it* ***cannot be run on purpose****, because running it on purpose is precisely what disqualifies the output.*

And therefore: **cynicism is parasitic on prior sincerity.** An instrumental elite can capture a body of belief, staff it, fund it, defend it and live off it for centuries — the

superstructure account describes that stage accurately. What such an elite cannot do is *make* one, because making one requires not being about power. **Every cynical order is drawing down a stock of authorlessness produced generations earlier by people who meant it.**

The arrow, reversed

Which gives the disagreement in one line.

On the superstructure account, belief is an **output** of the material order: the base generates the ideas the base requires.

On this account, belief is an **input the material order cannot generate for itself.** It has to be found, lying around, made by somebody else for something else — and the entire history of rulers reaching for foreign genealogies, powerless caliphs, distant patriarchates and inherited scriptures is the history of men going shopping because they could not manufacture.

The strongest single piece of evidence for the reversal is behavioural rather than theoretical, and this project calls it the **expenditure tell**: *force never pays for what it does not need.* Timur could conquer from Delhi to Ankara and could not make himself a descendant of Genghis Khan — so he married a Chinggisid princess, took the subordinate title of royal son-in-law, and ruled through puppet khans he could have dispensed with in an afternoon. A man with an unlimited army paid a real, avoidable price to a claim he could not forge. On the superstructure account that behaviour is unaccountable. On this one it is the ordinary situation of the powerful.

Part IV — Nobody has to be mistaken

Why the mechanism does not require the ruled to be deceived about anything.

The second half of the disagreement is about the believer rather than the ruler, and it is the half that matters morally.

False consciousness, as a concept, requires an error. It says the subject holds motives he takes to be real which are not the true motives driving him, and that his compliance depends on that mistake. Correct the picture and the compliance should go.

The mechanism described in this paper requires no error whatever.

A metaphysical view is not a mistake about material position

A person who holds that the cosmos is ordered in a particular way, that authority in it descends from a particular source, and that certain obligations follow, is not thereby wrong about his rent, his wages, his taxes, or who benefits from them. Those are separate propositions. He may hold the first set and see the second set perfectly clearly — and the historical record is full of people who did exactly that, which is why peasant revolts so frequently appeal to the *same* cosmology against the men administering it.

The political consequence of a widely-held cosmology is a side effect that nobody designed. Feathers are not a deception practised on birds by the pressures that later exploited them. That an accreted body of belief happens to solve a coordination problem for people who did not make it is exactly as much a trick as insulation being useful for flight.

The evidence that the doctrine bound the elite more than the mass

There is a substantial literature making a version of this objection from inside the sociological tradition, and it deserves to be named because it is stronger than a philosophical point.

In 1980 the sociologists **Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan Turner** published a book-length examination of what they called the dominant ideology thesis, and their central finding runs against it. In feudal Europe the dominant ideology principally incorporated the **dominant class** — the mechanism they identify is

Catholic family morality regulating inheritance in land, which bound the propertied — while the apparatus for transmitting it to the peasantry was weak enough that subordinate classes were largely untouched. In later capitalism, they argued, what secures compliance is less ideology than the ordinary compulsion of economic relations.

Notice how close their positive finding is to this project's. A doctrine that regulates who inherits land is a doctrine that authors title among the propertied — which is exactly the horizontal function this framework attributes to an anchor, arrived at independently and from the other direction.

The sociologist **Michael Mann** had reported a related result in 1970: cohesion in liberal democracies rests less on shared values than on pragmatic acceptance and on the absence of any coherent alternative, and value consensus is weaker among the working class than among the middle class — which is the wrong way round for a theory of ideological incorporation.

And the anthropologist **James C. Scott**, in work through the 1980s and 1990s, documented the phenomenon directly. Subordinate groups routinely perform deference in public while maintaining offstage a running critique of exactly the arrangements they appear to accept — a **public transcript** and a **hidden transcript**. On his account the appearance of ideological consent is very often theatre performed under observation, which is a devastating result for any theory that reads compliance as belief.

What Scott's result costs this project too

Honesty requires noting that Scott's finding is a problem for the framework here as much as for Marx, and this project has previously not engaged it.

If compliance can be theatre, then the transmission apparatus is not evidence of reception, and much of what this project has treated as evidence of mass belief is nothing of the sort. Consider the way the case for mass belief has typically been made: a liturgical language, an education monopoly, low literacy, a doctrine mapping the social order. **Every item in that list is a fact about the machine rather than about what came out of it.** And a liturgy in a language the congregation cannot understand is, on reflection, evidence of *weak* doctrinal transmission and strong ceremonial coordination — which is a different claim.

The correction is worth stating plainly because it sharpens the rest of the paper: **this project has been measuring transmission and calling it reception.** Part VIII proposes an instrument that measures the thing itself, and it works precisely because it measures what the ruler does rather than what the ruled say.

And the version of belief the mechanism actually needs

One clarification prevents the argument from claiming more than it should.

The mass mechanism does not require anyone to hold a sophisticated doctrine, to have examined it, or to be able to state it. What it requires is that a person experiences the arrangement as **how things are** rather than as a demand backed by a threat — which is a disposition rather than a creed, and is compatible with a great deal of private grumbling, scepticism about particular clerics, and clear-eyed knowledge of who is being enriched.

Which is why the variable that actually moves is not doctrinal assent. It is the one isolated in Part VI.

Part V — The other rival: compliance without belief at all

Preference falsification, and why it describes an expensive state rather than a cheap one.

Before the paper's own contribution, a third account has to be dealt with, because it explains a great deal that neither Marx nor this framework does — and because it is the position an intelligent sceptic will reach for.

The economist **Timur Kuran** argued, in a series of works culminating in a book of 1995, that people frequently **misrepresent their preferences under perceived social pressure**. In public they say and do what they believe is expected; in private they hold something else. He called this *preference falsification*, and he drew out two consequences.

The first is that **public opinion can be almost entirely disconnected from private opinion**, so that an order can appear to enjoy overwhelming support while being privately rejected by most of the people performing it.

The second is that such situations are **unstable in a particular way**. Because everyone is hiding, nobody knows how many others agree with him — so a small change in the visible number of dissenters can trigger a cascade, as each person's threshold for going public is crossed in turn. Which is Kuran's explanation for why revolutions astonish everyone, including the participants, the ruling apparatus and foreign intelligence services. The Iranian revolution of 1979 is one of his standing examples: the American intelligence assessment of October 1978 held that the Shah would remain on the throne for the foreseeable future, and he was gone in a hundred days.

This is a serious rival and it is largely correct as description. It explains compliance without belief; it explains why compliance can vanish overnight; and it explains why nobody sees it coming.

But notice what it does *not* do, and this is where it fits into the framework rather than replacing it.

Preference falsification is a mechanism of the expensive order, not the cheap one. It requires that people be watched, or believe they might be. It requires that the cost of visible dissent be high and be continuously maintained. It requires an apparatus, and the apparatus must be paid for, forever, out of the order's own revenue.

And it is fragile in exactly the way Kuran describes: the whole structure rests on each person's ignorance of what the others privately hold, so **anything that reveals the distribution can collapse it in days.**

Which is precisely what an anchor that has taken does *not* require. A person for whom the arrangement is simply how things are does not need to be watched, does not need to falsify anything, and does not become a cascade risk when the surveillance lapses.

> ***Marx says the belief is manufactured. Kuran says the belief is unnecessary, only the visibility matters. This framework says both are describing what a ruler is forced to do when the thing he could not manufacture is missing — and that the difference between those states is the whole of what an order costs to run.***

Which converts Kuran's mechanism from a rival into an instrument, because it tells you exactly what to look for. **If compliance runs on preference falsification rather than on belief, the order must continuously suppress common knowledge** — and suppression of common knowledge is visible, expensive, and leaves records.

Part VIII is that measurement. Part VI is the variable it measures.

Part VI — The fidelity variable

Two quantities the project has been treating as one.

Here is the paper's first contribution, and it comes from noticing that a question this project has been asking has two answers rather than one.

The project's mass-side question has been: **do the ruled hold the ground?** But a person deciding whether to comply is not evaluating a cosmology in the abstract. He is evaluating a demand made in the name of that cosmology by particular men. And those are separate judgements.

> ***Benefit side of compliance = strength of the anchor × perceived fidelity of the occupant to it.***

The two terms move independently. An ancient, deeply-held, universally-shared ground can sit above a set of occupants nobody believes represent it — and then the product is small, and compliance has to be bought with cost rather than with belief. Conversely a modest ground can sit above occupants who are widely believed to be faithful to it, and run cheaply.

And the product, not either term, is what the ruler actually has.

Why the distinction is not obvious

It is easy to miss because most historical cases move both terms together. Where an order runs for centuries, the occupants and the ground fuse in ordinary perception: the Ethiopian emperor *is* the Solomonic line for practical purposes, and a challenge to him is a challenge to it.

The distinction becomes visible in exactly two situations. The first is when an occupant is installed by a route that visibly does not satisfy the ground's own criteria. The second is when an occupant's conduct visibly contradicts what the ground requires. Both have occurred in Iran, both recently, both in public.

Iran, with the terms measured separately

Term one: the ground. There is no serious evidence that Twelver Shi'ism has collapsed in Iran, and a good deal that religious identity remains widespread and deeply

held. Survey work on the question is contested and difficult to conduct in an authoritarian setting, and this paper does not lean on it. What matters for the argument is more robust than any survey: the mass protest movements of the last decade have not been anti-Shi'i movements, have not attacked the Hidden Imam, and have not proposed an alternative cosmology. They have attacked a government.

Term two: fidelity. This is where the collapse is.

The relevant history is public and undisputed in outline. The office of Leader was created by a doctrine written by the man who would fill it. In 1989 the constitutional requirement that the Leader be a *marja'-e taqlid* — a source of emulation, the senior rank of Shi'i authority, conferred by the scholarly guild and by voluntary lay following and appointable by nobody — was **removed by amendment, seven weeks after a man who did not hold it had already been installed.** In March 2026, after the Leader was killed in a foreign airstrike, the Assembly of Experts named his son, under what reporting describes as heavy pressure from the Revolutionary Guard, in a republic founded by overthrowing a monarchy and whose doctrine explicitly disfavours hereditary succession.

None of that requires anyone to abandon Shi'ism to reach a conclusion about it. **It requires only ordinary attention.** A believer who watches an office lower its own entry requirement to fit the available man, and then pass to that man's son, is not losing faith in the Imam. He is concluding that the office has been taken over by people running their own account — which is a judgement about *fidelity*, not about the ground.

And the compliance consequence tracks the second term. Which is why an order can face a legitimacy crisis of this severity while the belief underneath it remains entirely intact, and why analysts who measure religiosity and conclude the regime is secure are measuring the wrong term.

What this repairs in the framework

Three things.

It explains a pattern the project has recorded without accounting for: that orders in serious legitimacy trouble frequently show **no decline in the underlying belief at all**. Buganda after 1900 is the same shape — a Kabaka who remained the object of a whole people's devotion while ceasing to be the author of any powerful man's holding, and a kingdom that could fill a road with its people and could not survive 1966.

It identifies where a ruler's discretionary risk actually sits. He cannot strengthen the ground; it is not his to strengthen. **The only term he can move is fidelity, and every move he makes on it is downward** — every amendment to fit a man, every

appointment made for reliability rather than qualification, every visible act of self-dealing.

And it gives the succession problem its real weight. A succession is the single most public test of fidelity an order ever runs, because it is the one occasion when the criteria are read out loud and applied to a named individual in front of everybody. **An order that has to edit its criteria at a succession has published a fidelity failure**, and it cannot take it back.

Part VII — Anchors that specify conduct, and coercion that refutes itself

A property of grounds that this project had not distinguished, and a trap with no exit.

The second contribution follows from the first, and it is a distinction between kinds of anchor.

Some grounds specify the character of the rightful ruler. Others do not.

Velayat-e faqih specifies it explicitly: the Guardian must be the most qualified and most just of the jurists, and justice in the technical sense is a stated condition of the office. The **Mandate of Heaven** goes further and makes the test empirical: disorder, famine and rebellion are themselves evidence that the mandate has lapsed, which is a doctrine containing its own falsification procedure. A **covenantal** ground of the biblical type ties the ruler's standing to his conduct in the same way.

Against these, **descent specifies nothing about behaviour.** A man is his father's son whatever he does. Neither does a **lottery**: the Venetian electoral procedure produced a legitimate Doge without any claim about his character. Neither does a bare **procedure**: an office correctly filled is correctly filled.

Call the first kind **conduct-sensitive** and the second **conduct-insensitive**, and the consequence for coercion is severe.

A conduct-sensitive anchor makes coercion self-refuting.

A secular tyrant who shoots demonstrators is doing what a tyrant does; the act is consistent with his claim, which is that he holds power. A ruler claiming to be the just Guardian acting for the Hidden Imam who shoots the faithful is doing something structurally different. **He is producing evidence against his own claim, in public, at scale, in the terms the claim itself specifies.**

Which is a trap with no exit, and its shape is a loop:

Thin belief raises the amount of force required. Force applied by a conduct-sensitive claimant visibly fails the test his own ground sets. That failure lowers the fidelity term further. Which raises the force required again.

Each turn of that loop is cheap in the short run and expensive in the term after, which is the class of trade orders are worst at declining, and it is why an order in this configuration tends to travel in one direction only.

The escape, and what Iran reached for

There is one escape, and the framework can now say what it is: **shift the effective basis of the claim from a conduct-sensitive ground to a conduct-insensitive one.** A ruler whose standing rests on descent is not refuted by his conduct, because descent makes no claim about conduct.

Which supplies a reading of March 2026 that neither the participants nor the commentary has offered.

Moving the succession from *qualification* — the most learned and most just jurist, which is what the doctrine specifies and what the 1979 constitution required — toward **descent** is exactly the move an order whose conduct is failing its own test would need. It is not necessary that anyone planned it as that. Position logic hands it to them: a claim that survives its holder behaving badly is worth more, to men in that position, than a claim that does not.

And there is a price, which the framework also names. A conduct-insensitive ground is more robust against the holder's behaviour and **weaker on every other axis.** Descent is unforgeable, which is the whole reason the armed men wanted it — but it has no time behind it in this case, the claim being months old and asserted in front of the men who watched it being asserted; it is attached to a man rather than an office; and it contradicts the founding doctrine so plainly that it cannot be codified as a rule without conceding what has been built.

So the escape from the self-refutation trap is purchased by weakening the anchor on the properties that made it usable in the first place. Which is not a solution. It is a later payment on the same debt.

Part VIII — Surveillance is the tell

The measurement instrument, and why its sign is inverted.

The paper's third contribution is an instrument, and it exists because Part IV conceded a real problem: transmission is not reception, performance is not belief, and asking people what they believe under an authoritarian state measures the state rather than the belief.

The way out is to stop measuring the ruled and measure **what the ruler pays**.

The elite-side tell, and its inversion

This project already uses one expenditure tell, on the armed side, and it runs: **force never pays for what it does not need.** Timur married a Chinggisid and ruled through puppets he could have removed in an afternoon; Turkish sultans sought investiture from a caliph with no army; Mamluks went into the desert to find a caliph and kept him for two and a half centuries. Each is a real, avoidable payment to a claim the payer could not forge, and each is therefore evidence that the claim was load-bearing. **On the elite side, spending on an anchor proves the anchor works.**

On the mass side the sign inverts, and this is the instrument:

> ***Spending on surveillance proves the anchor did not take.*** *Because surveillance is what a ruler buys instead of the thing he could not obtain — and the scale of the purchase is a direct read on how much of that thing is missing.*

The two are the same principle applied to opposite purchases. One measures what a ruler pays to *acquire* legitimacy; the other measures what he pays to *substitute* for it. A believed subject keeps his own account and polices himself for nothing, which is the entire economy of a story that works. Everything spent watching him is the difference between that and what the ruler actually has.

The instruments, and what they read

The tell is measurable, and it is measurable from ordinary state records rather than from the population.

The ratio of internal to external security expenditure. An order that fears its own population more than its neighbours has told you which is the harder problem.

The existence of a second armed force addressed to the regime rather than to the state. A ruler with one army trusts the country; a ruler with two does not.

Morality and conduct enforcement. Policing what people wear, drink and say is policing the parts of life a believed subject would police himself, which is why it appears where he does not.

Portable identity and monitoring instruments. This project has one previous case of the type: the *kipande*, a numbered copper container worn by law at the throat of every adult African male in colonial Kenya from 1919, holding his description, his tribe and his employers' remarks on his conduct. The framework reads that object as **a portable file** — the externalised memory an order must carry because it cannot trust a man to hold himself in place by his own conviction. The tag weighs precisely what a warrant would have carried for nothing. A basij network embedded in neighbourhoods, workplaces and universities is the same object built out of people rather than metal.

The purest instance: switching off common knowledge

The sharpest reading the instrument permits concerns something a pre-modern order could not do, which is why the contemporary case earns its place in this paper.

On 16 November 2019, following protests triggered by an abrupt fuel price increase, the Iranian authorities ordered service providers to disconnect. Cellular operators began going down in the early afternoon; by evening the country was in near-total darkness from the outside world. The blackout ran roughly a week. Amnesty International documented at least 304 people killed; other estimates run far higher; several thousand were arrested. Further shutdowns have accompanied every subsequent protest wave, and the shutdown accompanying the protests of December 2025 and January 2026 was described by specialists as the most extreme yet.

Now the detail that makes it evidence rather than illustration. **The domestic internet stayed up.** Banking and government services continued through the 2019 blackout, which minimised the economic damage and kept the state functional. What was severed was the connection to everywhere else — and in the 2026 shutdown even domestic services were disrupted, which is the instrument being turned up.

Read that construction carefully, because it identifies what the state was actually buying.

They did not switch off information. Iranians could still transact, still use domestic services, still know what was happening to them personally. **What was switched off**

was the layer on which people learn what is happening to everyone else — the ability to see the scale of a protest, to know that the next city is out too, to see the footage, to discover that the private opinion one has been hiding is the majority opinion.

That is not censorship in the ordinary sense. **It is the deliberate destruction of common knowledge**, and it is Chwe's mechanism operated in reverse at national scale, by a state that has built the engineering to do it selectively and keeps it on the shelf.

Which closes the loop with Kuran. If compliance runs on preference falsification, the whole structure rests on each person's ignorance of what the others privately hold — so anything that reveals the distribution can collapse it in days. A state that has built, tested and repeatedly deployed a national instrument for preventing exactly that revelation has **published its own assessment of what it is sitting on.**

And it is worth setting the instrument beside its own inverse, in the same country, forty years earlier. In 1978 the revolution against the Shah was timed by the Shi'i custom of commemorating a death on the fortieth day: the killings at Qom in January produced commemorations across the country in February, whose casualties produced the next round in March, and so on. Participants called it *doing the forty-forty*. That is a **self-clocking common-knowledge machine** — it schedules its own next occasion, in advance, on a date every participant can calculate, in a form the state could not ban without banning mourning.

In 1978 the coordination ran on a calendar the state could not switch off. In 2019 and again in 2026 the state switched off the network instead. Same mechanism, same country, opposite ends of the wire — and the second is the tell for the first having failed.

Part IX — Why structural change does not come from below

The bystander problem, applied downward.

The findings above have a consequence that sits awkwardly with both the revolutionary tradition and with ordinary democratic intuition, and it should be stated plainly rather than left implicit.

A mass movement can do two things to an order and cannot do a third.

The reason is the same coordination structure that produces warlordism among the armed, applied one level down. A person considering visible dissent faces exactly the bystander problem: his safety depends almost entirely on how many others turn out, he cannot verify that number in advance, and everyone else is making the identical calculation about him. And the entire surveillance apparatus described in Part VIII exists to prevent the common knowledge that would resolve it.

What a movement can do, first, is raise the cost side until factions inside the hierarchy recalculate. Sustained protest makes an order expensive — in money, in legitimacy abroad, in the time of its security services, in the internal disagreements it forces about how much force to use. Those are real effects and they change behaviour inside the apparatus.

What it can do, second, is test the floor. A floor is not a quantity of men and weapons; it is a set of armed men each of whom could refuse, so obedience is a forecast each soldier makes about the others. A crowd is the occasion on which that forecast gets tested, and it can flip. On 11 February 1979 the Imperial Iranian Army — four hundred thousand men, the best-equipped force in the region — declared itself neutral, and the monarchy ended. **There was no defeat and no decisive battle. Units did not lose; they stopped.** The Shah's floor did not lose a war; it lost a forecast.

What a movement cannot do is author a successor.

A crowd can vacate a chair. It has no mechanism for filling one, because filling one requires a source of title, and a source of title is precisely the thing a crowd does not possess and cannot generate — its own claim being a fact about how many people are currently in the street, which is the definition of a claim that expires.

And 1979 is the demonstration. The streets contained nationalists, leftists, bazaar merchants, students, secular liberals and clerics. The order that emerged was not

chosen by the crowd from among those options. It was the one institution in Iran holding **a credential the state had never issued** — a clerical class made by peer reputation and voluntary lay following, funded by religious dues that passed directly from believers to scholars with no state in the circuit, and with its senior seats in another country. Every other opposition institution held a credential the Shah could reach, and he had reached it: parties banned or manufactured, press controlled, nationalists and left broken. **A capture campaign selects for institutions with foreign credentials**, and the survivor inherits.

> ***Crowds are a solvent, not an author.*** *They dissolve a settlement and they cannot write one, and what gets written afterwards is written by whichever body was already holding a claim that the outgoing order could not revoke.*

This is not a counsel of futility and it should not be read as one. The energy is real, the cost it imposes is real, and the floor test is the single event that ends orders. But it explains why revolutions so reliably deliver power to organised bodies that most participants had not intended to empower, and why the interval between a collapse and a settlement is so consistently won by whoever was already credentialled from outside.

Part X — How orders of this kind actually end

Three routes, and one thing that does not work.

If the mass cannot author a successor, the question of how such an order ends has a short and specific answer set.

Route one: a faction inside the hierarchy. The cheapest and commonest. Somebody already holding a title the order authorised uses it to displace somebody else. The order survives the event; the occupants change.

Route two: an outside hierarchy with a greater floor destroys the coercive capacity, and then, being the only party with force in the field, says who owns what. This is the ordinary end of orders in the historical record, and it is not a test of the settlement at all — this project excludes conquest from evidence about anchors for the same reason a demolished building tells you nothing about its foundations.

Route three, which the framework flags and which is easy to miss: the floor does not fall, it forks.

Where an armed body has become the operative party and the office that appoints its commanders is itself filled by that body's preference, the loop is closed: the guard authors the leader who authors the guard. This project calls that configuration **fused**, and its property is that there are as many sources of title as there are claimants, because every claimant is his own interpreter. A fused order has **no authority outside itself to settle a disputed command** — and the failure mode is therefore not gradual decline but a sudden split at the first genuinely contested succession *inside the armed body*, with no mechanism for repair, because repair requires somebody with standing who is not a party.

The First Türk Khaganate is the pure case: an anchor nobody could forge — descent in the ruling clan, holding a mandate from the sky — with no interpreter class at all, so that heaven's favour was read off victory. It ran twenty-nine years from a founding that reached from Manchuria to the Black Sea, and split permanently at its first contested succession.

And the thing that does not work

One negative finding belongs here because it is live.

A decapitation campaign against an order whose anchor is unforgeable removes an occupant, not a source. In 2025 and 2026 a foreign power killed the commander-in-chief of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, his successor, the chief of the general staff, the aerospace commander, dozens of senior officials, and finally the Supreme Leader himself. A successor was named within eight days.

The framework says why that was predictable. **You cannot kill a person who is in occultation, and you cannot bomb a genealogy.** What an external floor can actually destroy is the *distribution* — the arrangement of holdings and the capacity that defends it — and if it does that, it becomes the party that says who owns what, which is where this project's entire subject begins again.

Killing the man in the chair, in an order whose chair is filled from a source no strike can reach, changes the occupant and tests nothing.

Part XI — Predictions

Stated so that they can fail.

P1 — Manufacture fails, and fails at transfer. Grounds assembled by an identifiable person who is also the beneficiary of what they authorise should fail at the first transfer to somebody who did not write them — visibly, by requiring the criteria to be altered. *Falsified if* such orders transfer smoothly on the original criteria.

P2 — Fidelity and ground move independently, and compliance tracks the product. Orders in legitimacy crisis should frequently show no measurable decline in the underlying belief, and their crises should be datable to public failures of occupant fidelity — irregular successions, altered criteria, visible self-dealing — rather than to doctrinal change. *Falsified if* legitimacy crises track declines in the belief itself.

P3 — Conduct-sensitive anchors produce the self-refutation loop. Orders whose ground specifies the ruler's character should show force and legitimacy declining together in a ratchet, and should drift over time toward conduct-insensitive bases of claim — descent, procedure, mere incumbency. *Falsified if* conduct-sensitive orders sustain heavy coercion without legitimacy cost, or drift the other way.

P4 — The inverse expenditure tell. Internal security expenditure, parallel armed forces addressed to the regime rather than the state, morality enforcement, and portable monitoring should vary inversely with the depth of mass belief, and should rise as fidelity falls. *Falsified if* orders with deep, undisputed mass belief maintain comparable internal surveillance to orders without it.

P5 — Common-knowledge suppression is the sharpest form of the tell. Orders relying on preference falsification rather than belief should build and deploy instruments aimed specifically at preventing people from learning what others think — as distinct from ordinary censorship of content — and the sophistication of those instruments should track the fidelity gap. *Falsified if* such instruments appear equally in orders whose belief is intact.

P6 — Crowds are a solvent, not an author. Popular movements should reliably be followed by settlements written by organised bodies holding credentials the outgoing order could not revoke, rather than by the movement's own most numerous constituencies. *Falsified if* successor settlements are commonly authored by the mass movements that produced the collapse.

P7 — Decapitation does not test an unforgeable anchor. Removing occupants of an office filled from an unforgeable source should produce rapid replacement without institutional change; destroying the distribution and the floor should produce institutional change. *Falsified if* decapitation of such orders reliably produces settlement change.

And the account fails as a whole if this is found: a durable order, running cheaply, on a source of rightfulness demonstrably manufactured within living memory by the people it authorises, with no prior material and no claim of recovery — or, alternatively, an order with deep and undisputed mass belief that nonetheless maintains surveillance at the level of orders that lack it.

Part XII — Where this is weak

Eight problems, two of which are serious.

Belief is not directly measurable and this paper does not measure it. The entire argument routes around that fact by measuring rulers' expenditure instead, which is a genuine advance and is also an admission. When the paper says Iranian religious belief has not collapsed, it is inferring from the character of the protest movements rather than from any instrument, and a critic could reasonably say the inference is soft.

The inverse tell has an obvious confound. Surveillance expenditure also tracks *capability* — a state that can build a national internet shutdown will build one, and a fourteenth-century state could not have. Comparing across technological eras is therefore close to meaningless, and the instrument is only safe **within** an era, or across an order's own history, where the question is whether spending rose as fidelity fell.

A second confound: external threat. An order under sustained attack surveils more for reasons that have nothing to do with belief. Iran has been under sanctions for decades and under direct military attack for eighteen months, which contaminates every reading of its internal security expenditure taken during that period.

The fidelity variable may not be independently measurable either, which would make it a re-description of the outcome. What saves it, if anything does, is that its failures are *public events with dates* — an amendment, an irregular succession — and can therefore be identified before the compliance consequences are observed. That is checkable in principle and has not been checked systematically.

Conduct-sensitivity is a spectrum treated here as a binary. Almost every ground says something about how a ruler should behave; the question is how central and how falsifiable, and this paper has not specified a scoring rule.

The Marx engagement may be attacking a position no serious contemporary Marxist holds. The crude base-superstructure model has been qualified within the tradition for a century, and Gramsci and Althusser are treated here in a few paragraphs each. A reader who wants a full engagement should treat this as the outline of an argument rather than the argument.

And two problems that reach the foundations.

The first. The claim that sincerity is the manufacturing process is **not verifiable and may not be meaningful**. We have no access to the mental states of people who built cosmologies over centuries, and the categories "sincere" and "instrumental" may not

map onto a world in which the distinction between explaining the flood and claiming authority over the floodplain was not drawn as we draw it. The argument may be projecting a modern separation backwards onto people who would not have recognised it.

The second. The manufacture prediction **has not landed in the paper's own central case.** Velayat-e faqih was assembled by a named man in the 1970s, attacked at the time as an innovation by the pre-eminent jurists of its own tradition, and has organised a state for forty-seven years. Four readings are available — that forty-seven years and two emergency transfers is not yet a test; that the floor has been doing the work the ground could not, which is what the whole of Part VIII argues; that the material was genuinely old and presented as recovery, so only the strong version of the claim fails; or that the framework is simply wrong and a ground *can* be built inside living memory if the builder holds the state long enough. I lean toward the second and third combined, and I record that this is the case that could break the argument.

Part XIII — The excluded, and the discipline

What the instrument is made of.

This project requires every study to name the people who were inside an order's coercive reach and outside its settlement, and this paper owes it in a particular way, because its central measurement instrument is **made of the harm done to them.**

Part VIII reads a national internet shutdown as an elegant diagnostic. What it was, on the ground, was this: at least three hundred and four people killed by security forces in a week in November 2019, by Amnesty International's documentation, with other credible estimates several times higher; more than seven thousand arrested; families who could not find out whether their children were alive; and a deliberate severing of the country's connection to the outside world **for the express purpose of ensuring that the killing could not be seen.** The shutdown is evidence for a proposition about belief. It was also the operational precondition for a massacre, and it worked.

The same applies down the list. The Basij network read here as a portable file built out of people is, for the people it watches, a neighbour who reports. The morality enforcement read here as a signal of missing belief is, for Iranian women, a matter of who may stop them in the street. The protest movements read here as tests of a floor's forecast are people who went out knowing what had happened to the last ones.

And the earlier excluded belong in the same list, because this paper has cited them as evidence: the students shot at Qom in January 1978 and the mourners killed at Tabriz forty days later, whose deaths are described here as a self-clocking coordination machine and were, at the time, families burying their children and then burying more; the several thousand political prisoners executed in Iran in 1988; the Baha'i community, which holds no place in the constitutional order at all; the several hundred thousand dead of the Iran–Iraq war; and, in 2025 and 2026, the people killed in cities by a foreign campaign whose effects on an interregnum this paper analyses structurally.

On the vocabulary. This paper has called human beings a *mass*, a *cost side*, a *tell* and *raw material*, and has described a week of killing as an instrument reading. That register is chosen because vagueness about mechanism has protected more atrocity than it has prevented, and because a state is easier to excuse when its machinery cannot be

described. The register makes suffering sound like a variable, and the debt should be paid once in plain words.

There is one further thing this paper owes, and it is the reason it was written. **The argument here is that the Iranian believer is not a dupe.** Whatever else follows from the analysis, that much should be said without qualification: a person who holds a metaphysical view about the order of the world is not thereby making an error about his rent, his wages or who is enriched by his compliance, and the long tradition of treating popular religion as a failure of understanding among the poor has been both wrong and condescending. It has also, repeatedly, been wrong in a way that mattered — because it led observers to expect that people would abandon their beliefs when they abandoned a government, and they do not, and the government that follows is built by whoever was already holding a credential the last one could not revoke.

Legibility is not pardon. To explain the machinery of an order that shoots its citizens is to say something about the machinery and nothing whatever in its defence.

Conclusion

The stock, the occupant, and the bill.

The most influential account of belief and rule holds that ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class — that a group with material force has intellectual force at its disposal, and that the ruled comply because they hold a picture of the world produced by others and serving interests not their own.

Most of that is right, and the part that is wrong is the part everything depends on.

It is right that bodies of belief get captured, and that capture is the normal condition. It is right that there is an apparatus of transmission and that whoever holds it holds two valves. It is right that consent is cheaper than coercion and that the difference is the thing worth studying.

It is wrong about where the belief comes from — and the evidence is the graveyard of the men who tried to make some. Diocletian sacralised himself and founded nothing. Henry VIII's headship was demoted by his own daughter. Akbar, with an army, a bureaucracy, a court theologian and no rival authority anywhere in his territory, could produce only a document in which *other men* attested that his judgement bound them. If belief were an output of power, these were the men with the power. **The property they needed was the absence of the act they were performing**, and no amount of force can supply that, because it is a fact about history rather than a feature of a design.

So the arrow reverses. Belief is not something a ruling order generates; it is an **input the order cannot generate for itself**, which has to be found lying around, made by people who were doing something else. Cosmologies accrete out of the sincere attempt to understand and order the world, revised by nobody in particular, attributed to no one — and that is the only known way to produce a thing with no author, and it cannot be run on purpose, because running it on purpose is what disqualifies the output. **Cynicism is parasitic on prior sincerity. Every instrumental order is drawing down a stock somebody else made and meant.**

Which is why the ruled are not dupes. A person who holds that the world is ordered a certain way is not mistaken about his rent. The political use of what he holds is a side effect nobody designed — and feathers are not a deception practised on birds.

But belief in the ground is only one of two terms, and separating them is what this paper adds. Compliance runs on the strength of the ground *multiplied by* the perceived fidelity of the men occupying it, and those move independently. Which means an order can arrive at a legitimacy collapse with the belief underneath it entirely intact — and Iran is the demonstration. Nothing in the last decade suggests Iranians have stopped being Shi'a. What they have watched is an office lower its own entry requirement in 1989 to fit the available man, and pass in 2026 to that man's son under pressure from the armed force he built. **No one has to abandon a faith to draw a conclusion from that. It requires only ordinary attention.**

And where the ground specifies the ruler's character — as *velayat-e faqih* does, as the Mandate of Heaven does — the collapse of the second term has a vicious property. **Coercion becomes self-refuting.** A tyrant shooting demonstrators is doing what tyrants do. A claimed representative of the Hidden Imam shooting the faithful is producing evidence against his own claim, in public, in the terms his own claim specifies. Which raises the force required, which produces more evidence, which lowers the term again. The only escape is to shift the basis of the claim to something conduct cannot refute — descent, procedure, incumbency — and that escape is bought by weakening the anchor on every property that made it worth having.

And there is a way to read all of this from outside, which is the paper's last contribution and the one it would most want used. On the elite side, force never pays for what it does not need, so expenditure on an anchor is evidence the anchor works. On the mass side the sign inverts: **surveillance is what a ruler buys instead of the thing he could not obtain, and its scale is a direct read on how much is missing.** A believed subject keeps his own account and polices himself for free. Everything spent watching him is the gap.

The sharpest instance available anywhere is contemporary and it is why this paper is not about Rome. In November 2019 the Iranian state disconnected its country from the world for roughly a week, killing at least three hundred people in the dark — **while keeping the domestic internet running**, so that banking and government continued. What was severed was not information. It was the layer on which people learn what is happening to everybody else.

That is not censorship. It is the deliberate destruction of common knowledge, at national scale, by a state that built the engineering to do it selectively and keeps it on the shelf. And it is the exact inverse of the thing that ended the Shah — a mourning calendar that scheduled its own next occasion on a date every participant could calculate, and that no state could ban without banning grief.

In 1978 the coordination ran on a calendar the state could not switch off. In 2019 the state switched off the network instead. Same country, same mechanism, opposite ends of the wire — and the second is a confession, published by the party best placed to know, about what became of the first.

A note on sources and scholarship

Every borrowed idea is explained in the text rather than invoked on authority; this note gives the references and the reservations.

On the superstructure account. Karl Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), for the base–superstructure model and the claim that social existence determines consciousness; Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (written 1845–46, published 1932), for the argument that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; Marx, introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843), for the passage on religion as the expression of and protest against real distress, and as the opium of the people — a passage whose fuller context is considerably more sympathetic than its usual citation, and which is paraphrased here rather than quoted. The term **false consciousness** is Engels', from a letter to Franz Mehring of 1893, not Marx's, and the paper says so.

On the stronger later versions. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (written 1929–35), for hegemony and consent secured through civil society; Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), for the distinction between repressive and ideological state apparatuses and the reproduction of the relations of production. Both are treated briefly and a full engagement is not attempted; Part XII says so.

On the critical sociological literature. Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (1980), for the finding that dominant ideologies principally incorporated the dominant class while the apparatus of transmission left subordinate classes largely untouched, and for the identification of Catholic family morality regulating inheritance in land as the feudal mechanism. Michael Mann, "The Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy," *American Sociological Review* (1970), for the finding that cohesion rests on pragmatic acceptance rather than value consensus and that consensus is weaker among the working class. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), for the public and hidden transcripts and for the argument that apparent ideological consent is frequently performance under observation.

On preference falsification. Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (1995), and his earlier articles on the surprise of the 1989 revolutions, for the mechanism, the disconnection of public from private

opinion, and the threshold-cascade account of sudden collapse. The Iranian revolution is among his standing examples; the CIA assessment of October 1978 is documented in Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (2004).

On coordination and common knowledge. Barry R. Weingast, "The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law," *American Political Science Review* 91:2 (1997); Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge* (2001); James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49:3 (1995). The application of Weingast's model horizontally among armed peers, and of Chwe's mechanism to the suppression rather than the production of common knowledge, are this project's extensions.

On exaptation. Stephen Jay Gould and Elisabeth S. Vrba, "Exaptation — A Missing Term in the Science of Form," *Paleobiology* 8:1 (1982). The feather example is the standard illustration; the political parallel is this project's.

On the historical cases. Diocletian's sacralisation, Henry VIII's Supreme Headship and its demotion under Elizabeth, Akbar's *maḥẓar* of 1579 — known principally through the hostile chronicle of ʿAbd al-Qādir Badāʾūnī and correctly identified in the modern literature as an attestation rather than a decree — Timur's Chinggisid marriage, the Abbasid caliphate under the Seljuks, the Mamluk caliphs of Cairo, and the colonial Kenyan *kipande* are all treated at length with their own sourcing in this project's case studies and theoretical papers, to which the reader is referred.

On Iran. The Shi'i clerical institution, the *marjaʿ al-taqlid* and the *khums* system; the Pahlavi capture campaign; the forty-day mourning cycle of 1978 and the Imperial Army's declaration of neutrality on 11 February 1979; the 1979 constitution and the office of Leader; the removal of the *marjaʿ* requirement from Article 109 by referendum on 28 July 1989, seven weeks after Ali Khamenei's selection on 4 June; and the succession of March 2026 following the killing of Ali Khamenei on 28 February, are treated in this project's Iran case study with full sourcing. **On the November 2019 shutdown**: the sequence of disconnections beginning around 2 p.m. on 16 November and reaching near-total darkness by evening, the roughly week-long duration, the survival of the domestic internet allowing banking and government services to continue, and the documented figure of at least 304 killed, follow Amnesty International's investigation, Article 19's report, Human Rights Watch, and the technical measurement work of the Internet Outage Detection and Analysis project and OONI. Higher casualty estimates have been reported and are contested. The shutdown accompanying the protests of December 2025 and January 2026, described by specialists as more severe than 2019 and as disrupting domestic services, is drawn from contemporaneous reporting on a live situation and is flagged as provisional.

On what is not attempted. This paper makes no claim to original historical research, and no claim to a complete engagement with the Marxist tradition, which it treats in outline in order to isolate one disagreement about origins. Its contribution is analytical: to state why a source of rightfulness cannot be manufactured by the people who need it; to argue that the ruled are not thereby deceived; to split the mass-side variable into the strength of a ground and the fidelity of its occupants; to identify the class of grounds for which coercion is self-refuting; and to propose an instrument — the inverse expenditure tell — by which the mass side of a settlement can be measured from a ruler's own accounts rather than from a population's answers.